

*There is no Before, only symbols we insist upon*

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We are a species deeply committed to being haunted. Not accidentally, not reluctantly, but with the diligence of archivists and the devotion of monks. We collect the past, label it, polish it, and then complain about its weight, as though it followed us home uninvited. We speak of history as if it were a creditor, memory as if it were law, and precedent as if it were gravity. One would think the past had agency, ambition, perhaps even a small legal team. In truth, it has none. The past is inert. It does not pursue us. We drag it with us.

We are told, with grave seriousness, that what came before explains what comes now. This sounds reasonable, even wise, until one notices how quickly explanation becomes obligation. The claim quietly shifts from “this happened” to “therefore this must continue.” The past, once descriptive, is promoted to governing authority. It acquires a vote. Eventually it acquires veto power. By this point it is no longer history but management, and we are surprised to find ourselves governed by the dead.

Our error rests on a charming but disastrous metaphor that time is a kind of accumulation. We imagine events stacking neatly behind us, like sedimentary layers or poorly packed luggage. The present, we assume, must bear the full load, hence our astonishment at how heavy things feel. But systems do not work this way. Nothing stacks. Nothing is carried forward by default. What persists does so only because it is actively maintained. The past is not a burden we inherit; it is a structure we continually rebuild and then insist we cannot live without.

Time itself is an accomplice in this confusion. We treat it as though it were a substance through which things travel, delivering obligations from yesterday to today. In reality, time is bookkeeping. It is a filing system for change, not a pipeline for force. Nothing arrives from the past. No rule, no wound, no identity crosses the temporal boundary on its own. Every arrival requires a present-tense act of symbolic reconstruction. The past must be summoned, and we are very good at summoning.

Memory is where this summoning becomes personal. We praise memory as a virtue, a moral faculty, even a duty. To forget, we are told, is dangerous. Forgetting risks repetition, erasure, and disrespect. All true, within reason, but we have quietly added something else to memory that does not belong there, command. We have decided that to remember is to obey, and that recall implies submission. Memory, once a signal, becomes a sentence.

This is an impressive feat of symbolic engineering. A recollection, which cannot act, is converted into an imperative, which must be followed. The past issues orders, and we comply, while congratulating ourselves on our seriousness. Meanwhile, the present does all the work of interpreting, reinforcing, and reactivating. Memory does not bind us. We bind ourselves in its name.

The distinction between something having occurred and something being retained is crucial and almost entirely ignored. Occurrence is effortless; retention is labor. Events happen once. Symbols must be maintained indefinitely if they are to persist. Every tradition, trauma, institution, and identity that survives does so because energy continues to be allocated to it. The idea that such things endure on their own is a comforting fiction, much like the belief that a bureaucracy runs itself.

This brings us to the notion of “before,” which we treat as though it were a natural feature of the universe, like gravity or rain. In fact, “before” is a symbolic achievement. It is an arrangement we maintain, a way of ordering meaning so that certain references remain privileged. We do not discover the past waiting patiently behind us. We assemble it, curate it, and insist upon its relevance. Then we act surprised when it refuses to go away.

Symbols, to be fair, begin their lives with honorable intentions. They are compression devices, designed to reduce complexity. A symbol spares us from reprocessing the full richness of experience every time we need to act. This is efficient, often lifesaving, but compression has a tendency to harden. What begins as a shortcut becomes an identity. What begins as a reference becomes a foundation. The symbol stops pointing and starts holding things up.

Once symbols become load-bearing, they are no longer optional. Remove them, and collapse is threatened. Or so we are told. Meaning ossifies into reference. Words, laws, roles,

and narratives acquire an air of inevitability. They cease to be tools and become anchors. At this stage, symbols no longer help us navigate reality; they tell us where we are allowed to stand.

Symbolic systems are excellent at preserving coherence by refusing to forget. Forgetting, after all, introduces ambiguity. It opens space. It requires judgment rather than obedience. For a system invested in stability, this is intolerable. Better to repeat, ritualize, and sanctify. Better to call continuity virtue and change betrayal. Thus, the past is preserved not because it remains useful, but because releasing it feels unsafe.

From here it is a short step to inherited necessity, that peculiar belief that whatever has lasted longest must be most correct. Traditions are framed as inevitabilities. Structures are defended not on the basis of their present function, but on their age. “This is how it has always been” is offered as a reason, though it explains nothing beyond the speaker’s reluctance to think further.

Law, morality, identity, and trauma all suffer from this mistake when they are treated as fixed inheritances rather than adaptive responses. Trauma is perhaps the most tragic example. An event occurs. It ends. Yet our body continues to behave as though it were ongoing. The memory is not processed as information about a concluded danger, but as proof of an eternal threat. The past does not wound again. The present keeps reopening the wound, out of a misguided sense of loyalty.

Here we must confront an uncomfortable fact. There is no external enforcer of symbolic continuity. No cosmic accountant audits our traditions. No metaphysical bailiff ensures that identities remain consistent. Institutions, selves, and cultures persist because they are actively reinstantiated. We repeat them. We rehearse them. We defend them. Then we complain about how exhausting they are.

The exhaustion, ironically, is part of the appeal. Burden provides comfort. It offers predictability, identity, and the reassuring sense that one’s suffering is justified. To carry the past is to feel serious, grounded, and legitimate. Dropping it feels reckless, even immoral. What would remain, after all, if we let go of the stories that explain us?

This is where fear performs its quietest work. The loss of symbolic coherence is mistaken for annihilation. To change one's story feels like ceasing to exist. To revise a tradition feels like betrayal. To release a trauma feels like disrespect. So we cling, telling ourselves that stability depends on accumulation, when in fact accumulation is what makes stability brittle.

Coherence, properly understood, is not about continuity for its own sake. It is about alignment. Alignment is always present-tense. Systems do not move from the past into the present; they stabilize now, using whatever information improves their fit with current conditions. The present is the only place where anything happens. Everything that exists does so because it is being sustained now. Nothing arrives from behind us with instructions. Time, stripped of its mystique, is merely a narrative convenience. It helps us describe change, but it does not enforce it. The past has no authority beyond what we grant it. Once this is seen, its metaphysical weight lifts. What remains is responsibility. Not responsibility to the past, but responsibility for what we choose to maintain.

At this point, objections will arise. Without the authority of the past, will everything dissolve? Will we descend into chaos, relativism, or worse, improvisation? The answer is disappointingly mundane. Releasing symbolic burden does not erase memory. It repositions it. Information remains available. Experience remains instructive. What disappears is the false necessity, the idea that because something was, it must continue.

Adaptive forgetting is not amnesia. It is intelligence. It is the ability to stop reinforcing patterns that no longer improve coherence. A system that cannot forget cannot learn; it can only repeat. Stability does not come from piling up precedents. It comes from maintaining alignment with reality as it is, not as it once was.

What might emerge if we took this seriously? Ethics would become responsive rather than deferential, concerned with consequences rather than conformity. Identity would loosen, allowing revision without guilt. Culture would behave less like an archive and more like a living process, capable of releasing what no longer serves without panic.

None of this requires contempt for the past. It requires proportion. History can inform without commanding. Memory can illuminate without imprisoning. Symbols can orient

without anchoring. The future, contrary to our training, is not heavy. It is light precisely because it is not dragging anything behind it.

The past does not hold us. We hold it, long after it has stopped holding us together.